

Second Committee Special Event, October 16, 2012
Panel discussion on “Conceptualizing a Set of Sustainable Development Goals”
Speaking notes for Women’s Major Group*

Thank you, Moderator, and distinguished panelists. We appreciate the 2nd committee’s invitation to Major Groups to speak at this event and look forward to continued engagement. ¹ My name is Eleanor Blomstrom of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization, speaking on behalf of the Women’s Major Group.

I will do my best to represent views of WMG, though as with many, perspectives vary and organizations are reassessing positions and priorities in the fast-moving post-2015 and post-Rio landscapes.

- Heard many interesting points by the speakers on rights, equity and equality, openness and interlinkages with issues such as climate change and biodiversity. Want to say first and foremost, the WMG sees gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment as fundamental to the post-2015 framework, and therefore to any consideration of SDGs. They must be included as a cross-cutting priority issue, and as a stand-alone priority issue, particularly as they have proven to be accelerators for development (as evidenced in an evaluation by UNDP of progress on MDGs).
- It is also important to look at sustainable development as fundamental to the post-2015 framework, not only an issue to be integrated.
- And, as Mr. Ahmadein stated, the SDGs are only one part of a larger development framework.

To build on MDGs, we must continue to assess their achievement and their gaps. For example, gender equality is not sufficiently addressed by MDG-3 and MDG-5, both are too limited in scope, with MDG5 falling short of the necessary rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights. The lack of progress on MDG3 for gender equality threatens the achievement of all the MDGs and of any potential SDGs. Women are 50% of the global population but make up more than 50% of people affected by poverty; lack of access to education, water/sanitation, health services; impacts of pollution and environmental degradation. Given the progress on MDGs, it is important to assess how effective a new set of goals will be.

We must also recognize that structural changes are needed, not just another set of goals that narrow the development agenda.

We want a transformative agenda that addresses discrimination in access to and control of services resources; and violence against women in its many forms. But what does a transformative agenda mean? It means going beyond the rhetoric of gender mainstreaming. Bella Abzug used to say, we don’t want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream. Years later, the idea is unfortunately still very relevant. We’re mainstreaming rights, equality, sustainability, etc., into streams that don’t flow anywhere.

¹ *The event was based around 3 questions. With limited time to speak, the speaking notes were adjusted and edited during delivery in response to discussions. Questions: How can SDGs build on MDGs and integrate SD into post-2015 development framework? How can SDGs integrate 3 dimensions of SD? How to develop universally applicable goals that at the same time take into account different national capacities and levels of development?

As Mr. Bapna said, one of the most pervasive criticisms of MDGs is the lack of connectivity and interlinkage amongst them, and I note this is true – particularly in the narrow goal addressing so-called ‘women’s issues’ or gender equality.

- In addressing women’s health and reproductive rights, it is one thing to raise awareness of maternal mortality with the MDGs. But, how can lasting improvement be made without addressing access to sustainable sources of clean water and energy, without addressing women’s unpaid work burden, or even more egregious threats to security, safety and freedom and protection from violence?
- How can it be possible to meet women’s health targets, in a context of increasing natural disaster, increasing agricultural stress and change, and other clear impacts of climate change – including an increase in vector-borne disease?

In our consultations with women for Rio+20, these issues and many more related to land tenure and access, land grabs/appropriation in the name of sustainable development, leadership and participation, a social protection floor, energy, food sovereignty, mining, etc., were highlighted by women as critical for their own resilience and that of their communities. The linkages must be explicit as we define the agenda. If not, the SDGs are destined to fail/miss opportunity. We need to connect the dots between the hundreds of MEAs and the range of mandates to uphold human rights and achieve gender equality. Need to see implementation of CEDAW in all countries.

Until we can enact a transformative agenda, we need safeguards based on human rights, which protect traditional users of land and natural resources, in particular women, from the negative impact of investments. And we need corporate accountability, redress for damage, and independent assessments of risks and damage from technologies and corporate activities.

As yet, member states do not agree on one set of goals or two. Aside from that discussion, let me remind you of the limits of our earth – and think back to Kate’s points on the bagel/donut. And from there comes the overarching principle of equitable sharing of environmental space, between nations, but also within nations, equitable sharing of the burdens and benefits, between women and men, present and future generations, between rural and urban areas, between those with wealth and those living in poverty.

In terms of universal applicability as well as national reality, sovereignty, ownership, the SDGs - or whatever shape the framework ends up taking – need to be realistic for the wide range of country-level realities or we risk no progress...whether in industrialized nations or developing ones. But let’s not settle for the lowest common denominator.

Setting targets can be challenging as evidenced by comments today. Integrating gender when developing targets and framing goals cannot be limited by existing data. Progress is not always quantitative. We in the women’s rights and gender equality movement know that positive change takes time and we can’t always count it. A rights-based approach is very useful in this way – with a range of ways to fulfill obligations and promote and respect every person’s rights.

A question to you: How can the discussion on SDGs contribute to a transformative, rights-based agenda? And not continue business as usual of MDGs with its unduly narrow focus? Thank you.